

Arachne's tapestry and the spider's web of mythological art

James Cahill

Myths are just made-up stories, so why is it that the myths told by the Greeks and the Romans have proved so endlessly fascinating, not simply to poets and artists in Graeco-Roman antiquity, but to poets and artists ever since? James Cahill investigates.

With its theme of 'shapes transformed to bodies strange', Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is often regarded as one of the most modern – even 'postmodern' – of ancient poems. The poem offers a long and looping chain of stories of crime and punishment, love and lust, flitting between literary styles and voices. High epic, low comedy, tragedy, and elegy are all compressed inside this new-style epic of the first-century A.D., the unifying thread of which is the theme of bodies shifting in shape and substance. Its mood changing with its theme, the *Metamorphoses* might be reckoned to be what the French thinker Jacques Derrida called 'a textual labyrinth panelled with mirrors'.

Mirror-image stories

Ovid provides real as well as metaphorical mirrors. The youths Narcissus and Hermaphroditus find their beauty reflected in glassy waters; the nymph Io and hunter Actaeon (transformed by vengeful gods into a cow and a stag respectively) become aware of their changed states when, in horror, they catch their reflections in streams. Stories, too, mirror one another. Take the one about the boy who fell from the sky after ignoring his father's advice – we think of Icarus, soaring too close to the sun; but there is also Phaethon, who insisted on driving his father the Sun's chariot high into the cosmos.

In the *Metamorphoses* it turns out that to tell one story is always to hint at other stories. Illustrators have often exploited this: the Dutch printmaker Hendrick Goltzius, in his engravings *The Four Disgracers* (1588), shows images of Icarus and Phaethon, but also of the sinners Tantalus and Ixion, each falling

and flailing. Stripped of its labels, any image in the group could stand for any of the fallen youths. The stories, like the images they inspire, are virtually interchangeable.

Woven crimes and punishment

Where Ovid's idea of mythology as a highly visual constellation of stories – a hall of mirrors, perhaps, or a fine spider's web of interconnections – is seen most vividly is in the story of Arachne in *Metamorphoses* book 6. This story tells of the weaving competition between the mortal Arachne and the goddess Minerva, one of many contests between men and gods in the poem. Ovid takes the opportunity to give a highly developed verbal description of a visual phenomenon as he describes Minerva's tapestry of the 'divine history of Athens' with its twelve gods enthroned in heaven, and, at the corners, four small examples of human presumption and punishment. Just the image of heavenly superiority we might expect from a goddess!

Arachne weaves a very different world view – one of whimsical violence and cruelty. Her tapestry catalogues rapes and deceptions committed by Jupiter, Neptune, Phoebus, Bacchus, and others, achieving its stinging power through the sheer number of episodes represented. The rambling order of the stories itself subtly reflects the capriciousness of the crimes depicted. Arachne's work is technically flawless – 'not even Envy could fault the work' (a classically Ovidian piece of hyperbole). But this does not prevent the jealous goddess from beating her about the head with a shuttle and destroying her creation. Only when Arachne hangs herself does the goddess

take pity and transform her into a spider, guaranteeing her an afterlife as a spinner of webs:

Instead of legs, spindly fingers stick to her sides; the rest is belly, from which nevertheless she twines a thread and as a spider practices her old weaver's art. (6. 143–5)

With its vivid images, the *Metamorphoses* comes as close as a written work perhaps can to a visual work of art. Everywhere in the poem we are coaxed to 'see' what Ovid writes. It is hardly surprising that from the Renaissance on this poem became known as the 'painter's Bible' and was the source of almost all mythological subjects popular in art. The Arachne tale, with its mixture of furious rivalry, violence, and ghoulish transformation, not to mention its investment in competitive 'techné' or 'craft', has itself attracted a great many artists, from medieval engravers to Louise Bourgeois's giant bronze spider, *Maman* (1999). Perhaps the most lurid – and erotic – representation of Arachne's metamorphosis is Gustave Doré's woodcut illustration of 1861 for Dante's *Divine Comedy*; Doré's hybrid of animal and human parts closely mirrors Ovid's 'spindly fingers'.

Stories of us and them, then and now, high and low

Mythology told in pictures, as Arachne found, can offer a means of linking different narratives and experiences – of bending (and blending) myths to our own situations and our own desires. This idea is brilliantly captured in the painting *The Tapestry Weavers* (*Las Hilanderas* c. 1657) by the Spanish painter Diego Velázquez, hanging in the Prado in Madrid (see illustration on p. 22). In the foreground Velázquez shows a modern-day Spanish workshop where five women engage in spinning and weaving. Behind them, framed within an illuminated archway, a group of figures appears to admire a completed tapestry showing the popular subject of the *Rape of Europa*. This is also

the first story included by Arachne in her design:

*Arachne pictures Europa tricked by
the appearance of the bull – you
would think this a true bull and
these true waves.* (6. 103–4)

One of the onlookers in this background scene (or is she just part of the tapestry? – Velázquez leaves it tantalizingly unclear) is wearing a gleaming ridged helmet akin to that of Minerva – a reference to Ovid's story of Arachne's competition: Ovid's account of Arachne has been transported into the 'here and now' of Velázquez's Spain.

By mixing 'myth' and 'life', Velázquez deftly blends the 'low' subject matter of 'genre painting' with the 'high' genre of mythological art; and by doing so, he reinforces the tenor of Ovid's story. Just as in the *Metamorphoses*, the fairy-tale stuff of myth is brought abruptly down to earth: otherworldly tales transform into *believable* events. The workaday setting of the painting and its 'realist' emphasis on the process of weaving find a close parallel in Ovid's emphasis on Arachne's low birth (so vital to the pathos of the story) and on the intricate mechanical aspects of weaving. In a story that pits human against god, it is towards the human realm – the everyday world of the underdog – that Ovid and Velázquez veer. In their versions of the myth, tragic realism trumps whimsicality (even if, ironically, the goddess ends up beating the mortal). Throughout the *Metamorphoses*, Ovid continues to exhort his readers to see his stories as if they were scenes of real life ('you would think these true waves'). When he invites us to visualize myths as pictures, therefore, it is as realistic, believable pictures or 'genre paintings' just like that of Velázquez.

Stories within stories

Just as stories are embedded within Arachne's design, so myths are set into Velázquez's picture – pictures within a picture. For Velázquez, as for Ovid, to tell the story of Arachne is to comment on the act of artistic creation. When the novelist A. S. Byatt wrote an essay 'Arachne' in 1999, she revealed that the painter possessed a copy of Perez de Moya's *Filosofia Secreta* (1585). In this compendium of myths, the Arachne story is rationalized as a moral fable: 'no matter how skilled anyone may be in any art, there may come, later, another who will outdo him'. Byatt concludes that Velázquez sensed himself 'in a line, a thread, of emulation, of reworking'. Indeed, Velázquez had based the tapestry in the background of his painting on Titian's celebrated canvas *The Rape of Europa* (1560–62), which had already been reverently copied by Peter Paul

Rubens in 1628 (this version is now located in the Prado). Rivalling and reworking the art of the past, Velázquez was being overtly, ostentatiously unoriginal. Fittingly, his painting was reproduced and popularized through prints such as that reproduced on the next page.

We can see the same sort of phenomenon, where earlier retellings or re-envisionings are embedded in later retellings or re-envisionings, in more recent versions of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* such as Ted Hughes's series of poems *Tales from Ovid* (1997) or Mary Zimmerman's 1998 stage adaptation of the poem in the USA, which brought the *Metamorphoses* to life for thousands who had previously never heard of Ovid. Staged around a reflective pool, Zimmerman's production translated Ovid's stories into decidedly modern contexts: Midas was reimagined as a wealthy businessman, perhaps symbolizing the 'myth' of the American Dream. Part of the enjoyment of Zimmerman's spectacle – as with Velázquez's painting – was playing the game of 'spot the myth' in modern costume.

Collecting myths

Ovid made his mark on London last year in a collaboration between the National Gallery and the Royal Opera House called *Sampling the Myth*, a series of live and recorded dance sequences, some of them existing routines, some new commissions. The story of Leda and the swan, another of the scenes woven by Arachne in Ovid, served as the central theme within a larger mosaic of references. The choreographer Kim Brandstrup's short film *Leda and the Swan* took W.B. Yeats's poem about the myth

*how can body, laid in that white
rush,
But feel the strange heart beating
where it lies?*

and combined it with a hypnotic danced mime that channelled the combination of violence and eroticism expressed by Ovid's line 'over Leda she had made a Swan his wings to splay' (6.109 in Arthur Golding's 1567 version).

This and other modern 're-enactments' of ancient myth share Arachne's (and Ovid's) strategy of 'collation'. Myths always reach out to other tales and other tellings. They achieve meaning collectively, as a group, whether assembled into an anthology or – in the case of painting – set within a tradition of representation. They are best understood as part of a spider's web.

Telling metamorphoses

When it comes to Arachne and Minerva, Ovid is tantalizingly ambiguous over who

has really 'won' the contest, leaving us with two opposing – irreconcilable – world views. The tale stands not as an example of divine order or cruelty, but as an example of the versatile and cumulative nature of mythology itself. These stories beg to be rewoven in words, thread, paint, or performance. But the fact that myths overlap and intertwine does not mean that they combine into some giant ingenious 'code' that can be unlocked. George Eliot's Mr Casaubon in *Middlemarch* (1874), who tries to write an encyclopaedic *Key to all Mythologies* that corrects the many 'misinterpretations' of other scholars, is a tragicomic figure performing a hopeless task. Instead we should think of myths as a constantly moving turnstile. To retell is to metamorphose; meaning is never fixed, but ever fluid – as likely to be arrested as those reflections on water that entranced Narcissus and Hermaphroditus.

James Cahill is writing a doctorate in the Faculty of Classics at Cambridge on the uses of classical mythology in contemporary visual arts.